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ABSTRACT

References are often made in art education literature about how art can enhance individuals' self-concepts. This document discusses the work of authors, Manuel Barkan, George Herbert Mead, and Sigmund Freud, who support this concept. Barkan's theory concerning how an individual's personality develops and changes by interacting socially is analyzed. In creating visual art forms, a similar interaction occurs between the creator and the artwork. The Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi's book, "Flow-The Psychology of Optimal Experience," (1990) is offered as a way to discuss what happens to the individual when involved in the creation of a visual form. Csikszentmihalyi's study suggests the conditions under which "optimal experience" is attained. The latter's final condition states that self identity and one's work are inextricably linked and a stronger sense of self emerges after the experience is over. How achievement in one experience does not necessarily transfer into another activity is explored and the conclusion is drawn that self-concepts develop through processes of interactions. Many young people receive negative reinforcements in their day-to-day experiences and the argument is made that it would be naive to expect isolated arts experiences to counteract all these negatives. However, art teachers should seize and build on positive experiences when students get involved in creative challenges. Although the present emphasis on cognitive learning in art education is welcome, this needs to be balanced with a comprehensive approach to how students are encouraged and supported in their feelings about themselves. (KM)

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Terms like "self-concept", "personality", "self-image" and role are frequently used in our literature. References are made to how experience in the creation or appreciation of art can be said to contribute to the enhancement of self-concept or self-image or personality. Of course, such is not always the case in that we all know of individuals whose talent and accomplishments in the arts are not linked with happy or positive self-concept or personality. Yet, the effort to link the two conceptually in more specific ways persists and, I think, with good reason!

An individual's "self-concept" develops through processes of interaction between that unique person and the particular conditions and circumstances that make up one's life's experiences. A person's "self-concept" does not exist at birth. It can be said to evolve as a function of interactions, past and present, as an individual deals with his or her life's experience.

My friend and former colleague, Manuel Barkan, stated the circumstances surrounding self-image very well: "The

problem that each individual needs to solve continually is the creation of a role for himself which is both sufficiently satisfying for his own needs and desires and adequately harmonious with the expectations of the group. His role is his overt behavior as he acts in relation to others. His needs, desires, and aspirations are rooted in and stem from his inner self.

Each individual has his own estimate of himself, his self-image. He views his own behavior and the behavior of others through his self-image--his self-awareness, his consciousness of himself, what he is, how he thinks he appears to others."

Put in another way, we each have a self-concept (or, some might observe, a cluster of self-concepts). These are the ways that we "see" ourselves. They constitute that inner image or picture of what we feel ourselves to be. In moments of reflection and contemplation, it's that inner self that reviews and responds to circumstances and events in our lives. Indeed, for some people, there are occasions when they talk to themselves. George Herbert Mead (Mind, Self, and Society, 1934) observed that an individual becomes "an object to himself only by taking the attitudes of other individuals toward himself within a social environment or context of experience and behavior in which he and they are

involved."

Of course, one should mention the important work of Sigmund Freud whose work in relation to the subconscious aspects of behavior and the dynamics of personality development are also important to our understanding of self-concept. It is Freud who has helped in our understanding of an individual's inner drives for satisfaction and the processes of resolution in dealing with inner and outer forces in our lives.

Barkan in his book A Foundation for Art Education (1955) in referring to Freud and Mead observed four key points that are particularly important for art education: "1) an individual communicates to other people, and he also receives communications from others; 2) communications is the process of social interaction through which an individual's personality develops: through organized visual, verbal, and gesture symbols the individual conveys his attitudes, feelings, and ideas to others; his communications elicit responses from others; 3) this process of social interaction is continuous; the personality of the individual changes, and it is potentially open to change through social experience, and 4) an individual's personality develops because he is able to become aware both of himself and of others around him."

It should also be noted that in the creation of visual art forms, the individual also communicates to one's self; that is, the creation of a painting or sculpture or print engages a person in a process where the art form in process communicates back to its creator inviting modification and change in response to the work itself.

For those of us who have engaged in this process there is shared understanding in what happens to the individual when involved in the creation of a visual form. This is the kind of thing that was the subject of study by Mihalyi Csikzentmihalyi (and reported in his book: Flow-The Psychology of Optimal Experience, 1990). He reflected upon the meaning of optimal experience: "It is what the sailor holding a tight course feels when the wind whips through her hair, when the boat lunges through the waves like a colt--sails, hull, wind, and sea humming a harmony that vibrates in the sailor's veins. It is what a painter feels when the colors on the canvas begin to set up a magnetic tension with each other, and a new thing, a living form takes shape in front of the astonished creator..." One could go on and on, identifying those special, focused moments in which individuals are fully engaged in the process of experiencing something deeply, when there is a flow and momentum to the encounter at hand. As Csikzentmihalyi put it: "Contrary to

what we usually believe, moments like these, the best moments in our lives, are not the passive, receptive, relaxing times --although such experiences can also be enjoyable, if we have worked hard to attain them. The best moments usually occur when a person's body or mind is stretched to its limits in a voluntary effort to accomplish something difficult and worthwhile."

Csikszentmihalyi's study suggests the conditions under which "optimal experience" is attained: first, we are engaged in something where we believe or sense that our purposes can be accomplished (there's not a feeling of doom and gloom, an "I can't do it" attitude); second, we are able to focus or concentrate on what we are doing; third, we are clear in our own mind as to what's being done; fourth, there's feedback so that we can monitor our own actions; fifth, we are deeply involved in such a way that extraneous worries and frustrations are cast aside; sixth, we have a sense of control over actions; seventh, the sense of the duration of time is changed (hours may seem like minutes and conversely a few seconds can seem like hours); and finally (and of importance in this presentation), self identity is inextricably linked with one's work (limited, personal instrumental concerns disappear, yet paradoxically, a stronger sense of self emerges after the experience is over).

In a word, a person engaged in optimal experience feels good about himself or herself.

Earlier I made mention of the case that having achieved optimal experience in one activity does not necessarily carry over to other activities. A person feeling good about himself or herself after having completed a painting or sculpture might soon revert to a negative or unhappy image when it comes to relationships with peers or family. A self-image or self-concept is not the result of a single encounter. Returning to my earlier assertion: An individual's self-concept develops through processes of interaction between that unique person and the particular conditions and circumstances that make up one' life's experiences.

In my work in Chicago I have come to see many young people who in day-to-day experiences are being told how "bad" they are, how "wrong" their actions are, and how likely it is that they will be "failures" in our adult world. There's a cumulative impact in the "negative spin" that is placed on these perceptions and predictions. Indeed, the downcast and dire predictions become self-fulfilling prophecies. It would be naive to expect that more singular and isolated arts experiences can counteract the weight of these negatives.

Yet, each of us as art teachers have seen those

instances where a student has had those moments of "flow", of creative involvement where there is a sense of "challenge" and "positive potential." These are the instances that we should build upon. I am here reminded of practices in many cultures in which children are encouraged and supported. The image that I have in mind is that of a parent or grandparent constantly with a child telling him or her how "good" and "right" things are. In a word, they are taught to "feel good about themselves" and others.

Herbert Read in his book Education Through Art said it very well: "perceptions resulting in images, sensations resulting in feelings--these are the elementary materials out of which we build our conception of the world and our behavior in the world. The purpose of education is to asist the child in that process of learning and maturation, and the whole question is whether our educational methods are proper and adequate for that purpose."

Presently there are emphases being placed upon more cognitive learning. Of course, we should all attend to matters involving the content of instruction and identification of anticipated learning outcomes. But, it is clear to me that these efforts need to be balanced with a comprehensive approach to how students are encouraged and supported in their feeling about themselves, the work they

are doing and their connections with others. Vitor Lowenfeld has provided us with a clear and concise articulation of the point I am making (Creative and Mental Growth): "As the child identifies himself with his own work, as he learns to appreciate and understand his environment by subordinating the self to it, he grows up in a spirit which necessarily will contribute to the understanding of the needs of his neighbors." Lowenfeld then goes on to emphasize that the attitudes and values being encouraged need not be limited to the arts." As the child develops creatively, the other subjects in his learning will necessarily gain in importance by this process. The child does not distinguish in his desire between identifying himself in creative activity and in history, for example. History, too, will become alive for the child as he becomes a part of it. Most of all, however, it is important for this world that educators realize that our ability to identify ourselves with our work and the needs of our neighbors may ultimately be responsible for our survival."